

Coping with the Pain

Some discomfort with activity can occur, especially when you first begin exercising. Exercise does not cause more “wear and tear” and is an important part of managing osteoarthritis.

Keep Active	Too much inactivity can lead to muscle weakness and make it harder to stay active. Regular physical activity can help manage pain and maintain strength and function. Choose activities that are appropriate for you, and talk with your healthcare provider or physical therapist if you are unsure where to start.
Risk of Falling	Hip or knee pain, weakness, or instability may increase your risk of falling. Keep your home well lit, use handrails on stairs, and remove tripping hazards. Use extra caution with ladders or step stools. Talk with your healthcare provider if you feel unsteady or have concerns about falling.
Watch Your Weight	If you are overweight or obese, weight loss can reduce stress on your hip and knee joints and may improve pain and function. Even modest weight loss can help. Talk with your healthcare team about nutrition, physical activity, or a weight-management program that is right for you.
Consider a Walking Aid	A cane or walking aid can reduce joint stress and improve stability. A knee brace may also help some people with knee OA. Ask your healthcare provider or physical therapist what is right for you.
Watch Your Shoes	Wear comfortable, supportive shoes that fit well. Talk with your healthcare provider or physical therapist before using special insoles or orthotics for OA.
High Impact Exercise	Activities that stress your joints may worsen symptoms. You do not need to avoid an activity just because you have osteoarthritis. If an activity causes lasting hip or knee pain, reduce the intensity, modify the movement, or choose a lower-impact alternative. A healthcare provider or physical therapist can help you find activities that work for you.
New Symptoms	If your knee pain is new, don't ignore it. See your healthcare provider as soon as possible, so you can prevent any further damage.

If you experience any “red flags” of the following, don't ignore it. Call your healthcare provider:



- You have severe, unexplained joint pain that persists more than 3 days.
- The joint is significantly swollen.
- You have a hard time moving the joint.
- Your skin around the joint is red or hot to the touch.
- You have a fever or have lost weight unintentionally.

This guide is based on the 2026 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Non-Surgical Management of Hip & Knee Osteoarthritis. For more information, scan the QR code or visit: <https://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/cd/oa/index.asp>



Taking Control of Your Osteoarthritis

This patient guide can help you and your healthcare team develop an action plan for managing hip or knee osteoarthritis (OA). Combining self-management with medical care can help reduce symptoms, improve function, and keep you active.

Keep Active

Low-Impact Activities



Staying active is an important part of managing osteoarthritis. Activities such as walking, swimming, cycling, and water exercise can help maintain movement, strength, and function. Choose activities based on your interests, abilities, and pain tolerance. If an activity is painful or difficult, talk with your healthcare provider or physical therapist about ways to modify it.

How Much Exercise?

The right amount and type of exercise will be different for everyone. Start slowly and gradually increase your activity based on your abilities and symptoms. A balanced program may include aerobic activity, strengthening exercises, and exercises that improve flexibility and range of motion. Some mild, temporary muscle soreness can occur when beginning a new activity. If pain is severe, persistent, or getting worse, talk with your healthcare provider or physical therapist.



Walking



Walking can be a good low-impact activity for people with hip or knee osteoarthritis. Start at a comfortable pace and distance and gradually increase as tolerated. Regular walking can help you stay active and maintain strength and mobility. Wear comfortable footwear, stay hydrated, and talk with your healthcare provider if pain or other symptoms make walking difficult.

Physical Therapy

A structured physical therapy program can help improve pain, movement, strength, and physical function in people with hip or knee osteoarthritis. Your physical therapist can develop an exercise program based on your needs, abilities, and goals and teach you ways to protect your joints during daily activities. Physical therapy may be provided in person, at home, or through telehealth depending on your individual needs and available resources.



Home Exercises for Hip OA

Stretching improves range of motion and keeps you flexible



Standing Straight Leg Raise to the Side

Stand and hold the back of a chair for balance. Place your weight on your left leg. Stand tall and lift the right leg out to the side - keep the right leg straight and outer leg muscles tensed. Hold 3 seconds, then slowly lower the right leg. Do two sets of 10 repetitions. Switch legs after each set.

How often to do this exercise: _____

This move helps you bend over or get in and out of cars

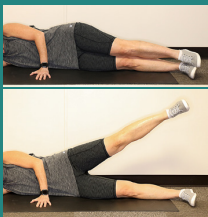


One Leg Balance

Stand behind your kitchen counter or a back of a chair, without holding on, and slowly lift one foot off the floor. The goal is to stay balanced for 20 seconds without grabbing counter. Do this move twice, then switch sides.

How often to do this exercise: _____

Strengthen hip abductor muscles



Side Leg Raise Extension

Lie on your side, stack your hips and extend both legs. Rest your lower arm under your head and your top arm on your top hip. Slowly lift the top leg keeping the feet and knees pointing forward. Lower the leg with control. Repeat 10 times each side for up to three sets. Do not allow low back to extend. Do not lift leg too high (more than 20 degrees).

How often to do this exercise: _____

Stretching improves range of motion and keeps you flexible

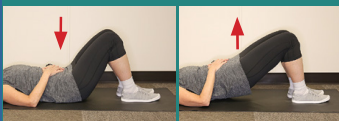


Clamshell

Lay on your side with legs stacked with your knees and hips bent to about a 45' angle. While keeping feet together lift the top knee vertically a few inches to the level of your hips then return to the starting position. Ensure pelvis does not rotate backward and only your knee raises. Engaging abdominal muscles can help if this occurs.

How often to do this exercise: _____

For core muscles - abdominals, gluteals, and back extensors



Bridging

Begin by lying on your back with your arms resting at your sides, your legs bent at the knees and your feet flat on the ground. Squeeze your buttocks, tighten your abdominals and lift your buttocks off the surface while keeping your shoulder blades on the surface. Keep the hips/pelvis level, do not arch your back or hold your breath. The motion is similar to 'scooting yourself up in bed.'

How often to do this exercise: _____

Home Exercises for Knee OA

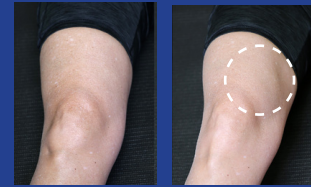
Before exercising, warm up with 5 minutes of light activity, such as walking or cycling.

Quad Set

Start by lying on the floor. (Put a towel roll under your knee) Keep both legs and heels on ground. Simply tighten the muscle on top of your thigh. Hold the left leg tense for 5 seconds. Keep breathing. Do two sets of 10 repetitions. Switch legs after each set. Do not let your buttock come off the floor/bed.

How often to do this exercise: _____

Help to strengthen the quadriceps muscle



Calf Stretch

Hold onto a chair for balance. Bend your left leg. Step back with your right leg, and slowly straighten it behind you. Press your left heel toward the floor. You should feel the stretch in the calf of your back leg. Hold for 20 seconds. Repeat twice. Then switch legs.

How often to do this exercise: _____

Stretching exercises also help prevent pain and injury



Straight Leg Raise

Lie on the floor, upper body supported by your elbows. Bend your left knee, foot on the floor. Keep the right leg straight, toes pointed up. Tighten your thigh muscles and raise your right leg. Hold for 3 seconds. Keep your thigh muscles tight and slowly lower your leg to the ground. Touch and raise again. Repeat 10 times, then switch legs. Do not raise your straight leg more than 45 degrees.

How often to do this exercise: _____

Build muscle strength to help support weak joints



Hamstring Stretch

Lie down. Loop a bed sheet (or a towel) around your right foot. Use the sheet to help pull the straight leg up and stretch it. Hold for 20 seconds, then lower the leg. Repeat twice. Then, switch legs.

How often to do this exercise: _____

Stretching improves range of motion and keeps you flexible



Squat without Bands

Begin with feet shoulder width apart, toes turned slightly outward. Bend knees and sit back slightly as you descend to about a 45' angle and keep weight through the heels. Rise up by pulling hips forward, pushing the heel into the floor and standing straight up. Push feet outward against the ground as if "spreading the floor" during the movement to ensure good hip muscle engagement.

How often to do this exercise: _____

Strengthen quadriceps, gluteus, hip abductors, and adductors

